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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ROME 001072

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SUBJECT: GOI RESOLVE SHAKEN BUT INTACT AFTER SIX SOLDIERS
KILLED IN AFGHANISTAN

REF: A. ROME DAIL...

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REF: A. ROME DAILY REPORT 9/17/09
1B. ROME 1040

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Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Elizabeth Dibble for Reasons 1.4
(B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The day after an IED attack in Kabul left six Italian soldiers dead and four wounded, political and public reaction ranged from strong statements in support of the mission to outright calls for the troops to come home. While PM Berlusconi told the Ambassador privately that talk of an exit strategy was premature, publicly he said that ""we are all convinced that our boys should be brought home as soon as possible,"" and that ""we had already planned for a significant reduction in (election support) forces, and so we will proceed in that direction."". However, he added, ""this is not a problem that a country with troops in Afghanistan can address by itself, because it would betray the trust of the other countries"" present in ISAF. However, Berlusconi's coalition partner Umberto Bossi, head of the Northern League, called openly for Italian troops to be brought home by Christmas. MOD La Russa, FM Frattini, and most of the leading figures of Center-Left opposition issued strong statements supporting the mission, but Frattini echoed Berlusconi's statement that the 500 Election Support Forces would return ""soon."". In a September 17 meeting with the Ambassador, MOD La Russa reaffirmed Italy's commitment to Afghanistan (noting that the U.S. has lost many more troops there), but warned that this incident will raise the public profile of the Afghan mission in unpredictable ways. Italy will hold funerals for the slain soldiers on September 21, which has been declared a Day of National Mourning. End Summary.

Worst One-Day Death Toll for Italy Since Joining ISAF

¶2. (C) One day after the most deadly attack on Italian forces since they deployed to Afghanistan, most mainstream Italian politicians from both the governing Center Right coalition and the Center Left opposition reaffirmed the importance of the mission, while calling for a change in strategy. The

attack, which left six Italian paratroopers dead and four wounded, raises Italy's overall death toll in Afghanistan to 21 since the start of the conflict. Press coverage of the incident has been intense, with gruesome photos of the scene appearing in the newspapers. Italian television talk shows on September 17 were dominated by coverage of the incident, with telejournalists staked outside the homes of the slain soldiers and several pundits calling for Italy's 3,100 ISAF troops to be brought home. MOD La Russa went immediately to the Senate on September 17 to reaffirm Italy's strong support of the mission and to head off accusations of inadequate protection for Italian troops, saying that no level of armored protection could have withstood such a powerful blast. "The vile and cowardly aggressors that hit in such a deceitful way," he said, must understand that "we are firmly convinced of our mission and will not turn back." After a September 18 cabinet meeting, La Russa went further, affirming that any talk of an exit strategy only encourages terrorists and reiterating the need for Italy to stand by its international commitments.

¶ 13. (C) PM Berlusconi showed somewhat less conviction in remarks made on the road in Brussels on September 17: "We are all convinced that our boys should be brought home as soon as possible," he said; "we had already planned for a significant reduction in (election support) forces, and so we will proceed in that direction" -- a reference to the 500 temporary Election Support Forces Italy sent prior to the August 20 elections and for which Parliament has only approved funding through the end of October. However, he added, "this is not a problem that a country with troops in Afghanistan can address by itself, because it would betray the trust of the other countries" present in ISAF. Berlusconi's coalition partner Umberto Bossi, head of the Northern League, called openly for Italian troops to be brought home by Christmas. (Note: Bossi has been sounding this note for several months, primarily for political effect. He has never, however, suggested that his support of the government is contingent on this issue. End note.) Center

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Left opposition leaders, including Massimo D'Alema, Piero Fassino, and Francesco Rutelli, all made statements in favor of continued Italian participation in ISAF.

Ambassador Reassured in Meetings with La Russa, Berlusconi

¶ 14. (C) MOD La Russa met with the Ambassador on September 17 shortly after his appearance before the Senate. La Russa thanked the Ambassador for U.S. expressions of condolence and noted that U.S. forces have made bigger sacrifices. He said Italy will remain in ISAF despite this incident but cautioned that Italy is an "emotional country." While this factor has not thus far resulted in significant criticism of the mission, the loss of six soldiers would raise the profile of the conflict in public opinion. La Russa also noted that the U.S. and Italy are closer than ever because the anti-U.S. far left has been marginalized by its failure to secure seats in Parliament in the April 2008 elections. MOD Political Adviser Alessandro Ruben told Pol M/C separately that the incident underscores the urgent need for a meeting between Secretary Gates and MOD La Russa as soon as possible, both to publicly bolster the GOI (especially the Minister who has been most vocal in supporting Italy's ISAF participation) as well as to read a key GOI interlocutor into U.S. strategic planning for the future (Ref B).

¶ 15. (C) In his initial call on PM Berlusconi on September 18, the Ambassador expressed USG condolences. Berlusconi said he had been up almost the entire night in Cabinet deliberations dealing with the aftermath of the incident. He reassured the Ambassador that Italy remained committed to Afghanistan and that the GOI's position was not that NATO should look for an exit strategy but rather a "transition strategy" that would lead to a more comprehensive approach reflecting real

needs on the ground.

¶6. (C//NF) Center Right (PDL) and Center Left (PD) contacts continue to assure us of the importance and stability of the mission. In reaction to the bombing, PDL Member of Parliament Manuela Repetti told us that Italy was committed to the mission more than ever, and she looked forward to her next fact-finding trip to Afghanistan. A top PDL parliamentary aide said that there is no question about strong and continued PDL and PD support for the mission. He did, however, express concern about the growing volume of the Northern League's rhetoric on the mission. He said that Bossi is playing a double game, in which he is speaking to his electorate out of one side of his mouth, while Lega will likely continue to vote for the mission. Still, he expressed concern about the impact of having a vocal and very effective communicator like Bossi and other Lega leaders talking about an exit strategy. PD Member of Parliament Renzo Lusetti confirmed that his party considers a continued, robust Afghanistan mission indispensable. He noted that it is much easier to take strong foreign policy positions now that the former Communists are no longer in Parliament.

¶7. (C) Comment: PM Berlusconi was in power during the 2003 bombing in Nassiriya, Iraq, an event that killed nineteen Italian soldiers and fed a wave of public opposition to the war that contributed to his eventual electoral defeat in ¶2006. His vacillating reaction to Thursday's bombing clearly reflects his this experience, which left him with an instinctive political aversion to casualties. He is also feeling the heat of an increasingly emboldened coalition partner who aims to cut into his voting base in upcoming regional elections next spring. Unlike Italy's participation in the Iraq war, the Italian mission in Afghanistan enjoys strong bipartisan backing and there is little reason to fear a large-scale Italian pullout. Maintaining or strengthening current troop levels, however, will likely become increasingly difficult, as Berlusconi feels the pressure of Bossi's ""bring the boys home"" rhetoric, as well as Finance Minister Tremonti's demands for ever more cuts in the defense and foreign aid budgets. Sustaining Italian commitment in Afghanistan will require more hand-holding by the U.S. in months to come, especially at senior levels. End Comment.

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